DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 110 CG 020 376

TITLE Understanding Depression and Suicide. Student Booklet.
INSTITUTION Alberta Dept. of Education, Edmonton. Special Educational Services Branch.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 12p.; For a related practitioners' manual, see CS 020 375.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Crisis Intervention; *Depression (Psychology); Foreign Countries; *High Risk Persons; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; *Suicide
IDENTIFIERS *Adolescent Suicide; Canada

ABSTRACT

This booklet was developed to provide students with some basic information on suicide. It describes the symptoms of depression and discusses the relationship between depression and suicide. Several important warning signs which may indicate that a person is considering suicide are presented, including physical, emotional, and behavioral signs. Myths and truths about suicide are examined. Fifteen general guidelines are provided to assist the student in dealing with such a situation. A general list of persons who might be able to provide suicide intervention is given and a list of resource agencies is included. (NB)

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UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

ED289110

Student Booklet

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Acknowledgements

Alberta Education acknowledges the following individuals and agencies for their support and information in the production of this booklet:

Dr. Ron Dyck, Provincial Suicidologist, Mental Health Division, Alberta Community and Occupational Health

The Suicide Information and Education Centre, Calgary

Bill Gordon, Counsellor, Bev Facey Composite High School, County of Strathcona

Donna Patterson, Psychoeducational Consultant, Edmonton

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Introduction

This booklet is for you. Your parents might like to read it and you may wish to discuss it with your family. It is designed to provide the most up-to-date information and to encourage discussion. The booklet describes the symptoms of depression and several important signs which may indicate that a person is considering suicide. General guidelines are provided to assist you in dealing with such a situation. As well, a list of resource agencies helpful to you, your friends and your family in such a crisis can be found in the back.

Note: Some helpful information is already available to you in *Health and Personal Life Skills* courses in junior high school and *Career and Life Management* courses in senior high school.

Suicide and Depression

Although depression and suicide are often related, not all depressed people are suicidal and not all suicidal people are depressed. However, the symptoms of depression provide some ways of recognizing a person at risk.

It is important to remember that the symptoms of depression may also include acting out behaviors. Often these behaviors can prove so disruptive at home or school that the underlying depression and potential for suicide are ignored.

When people are depressed they often experience:

- Negative feelings about themselves
- Sadness or apathy (especially prolonged)
- A tendency to blame themselves
- Loss or increase of appetite (significant changes in weight)
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Constant fatigue
- Chronic but unexplained aches and pains
- Loss of interest in life
- An inability to make decisions
- An inability to analyze and solve problems

They may act out by:

- Increasing alcohol or other drug use
- Changing their pattern of school attendance; truancy
- Becoming delinquent
- Showing major changes in school performance
- Becoming sexually promiscuous
- Taking risks; involving themselves in dangerous undertakings
- Fighting with friends, family and teachers
- Changing their level of activity (e.g., restlessness to boredom)
- Rejecting past friends, family
- Having more accidents; driving dangerously
- Running away from home

Suicide: Common Warning Signs

Although individual motives for suicide vary, there are some common warning signs. These signs may indicate that someone is at risk or is having personal, family or school problems.

Suicides seldom occur without warning. If you are aware of common signs and of changes in behavior, you can recognize and better help a person in crisis. These signs represent behaviors which can serve as a "red flag" to you, your parents, or friends.

The warning signs are usually physical, emotional and behavioral in nature:

Physical Signs:

1. Neglect of personal appearance.
2. Sudden changes in manner of dress, especially when the new style is completely out of character.
3. Chronic or unexplained illnesses, aches, and pains.
4. Sudden weight gain/loss.
5. Sudden change in appetite.

Emotional Signs:

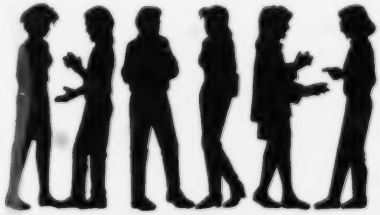
1. Sense of hopelessness, helplessness, or futility.
2. Inability to enjoy or appreciate friendships.
3. Wide mood changes and sudden outbursts.
4. Anxiousness, extreme tension, or agitation.
5. Lethargy or tiredness.
6. Changes in personality: from outgoing to withdrawn, from polite to rude, from compliant to rebellious, from well-behaved to "acting out".
7. Loss of the ability to concentrate: daydreaming.
8. Depression, sadness.
9. Loss of rational thought.
10. Feelings of guilt or failure.
11. Self-destructive thoughts.
12. Exaggerated fears of cancer, AIDS, or physical impairment.
13. Feelings of worthlessness or of being a burden.
14. Loss of enjoyment from activities formerly enjoyed.

Behavioral Signs:

1. Decreased school activity; isolation. Sudden drop in achievement and interest in school subjects.
2. Loss of interest in hobbies, sports, work, etc.
3. Unexplained use of alcohol or other drugs.
4. Increased use of alcohol or other drugs.
5. Withdrawal from family and former friends, sometimes acting in a manner which forces others away.
6. Changes in eating and/or sleeping habits.
7. Changes in friendship.
8. Running away from home; "skipping school".
9. Accident proneness and increase in risk-taking behavior such as careless driving, bike accidents, dangerous use of firearms (Russian Roulette).
10. Sexual promiscuity.
11. Giving away prized possessions (e.g., record collection).
12. Sudden changes in personality.
13. Preoccupation with thoughts of death.
14. Making of a will; writing poetry or stories about suicide or death.
15. Quietly putting affairs in order; "taking care of business".
16. Threatening suicide.
17. Hoarding pills, hiding weapons, describing methods for committing suicide.
18. Previous suicide attempts.

While all these signs may indicate that a person is experiencing problems, the behavioral signs 14-18 are especially significant. (These signs indicate that a decision to commit suicide may have been made.) A previous attempt is a particularly important sign. Such an attempt increases the risk of future ones. In any of the signs, the key word is **CHANGE**. As a classmate or friend, it is important for you to be aware of such changes in the behavior of people around you.

Note: The symptoms of depression including the list of "acting out" behaviors, and the common warning signs for suicide are very similar. Together, they provide ways to recognize a person at risk.



Some Myths and Truths About Suicide

The potential for suicide exists in all of us — rich or poor, young or old, male or female, urban or rural, popular or not.

There is a myth that people who talk about suicide are not likely to attempt suicide. In fact, many people who attempt or commit suicide, often tell someone, either directly or indirectly. Most people do give some warning of potential suicide. You need to be alert to such warnings, to listen carefully to those around you who may be in crisis. You might think it is safer not to talk about suicide with someone you think is considering it. On the contrary, talking may be the only way to understand the person's intentions or to confirm your fears. A willingness to listen indicates that you care, that you are willing to help. Often the person thinking about suicide is unsure about killing himself or herself and simply wants to escape a tough situation. A person may be more inclined to think of suicide or to take unnecessary risks when under the influence of drugs or alcohol. However, it is not easy to understand someone's motives for considering suicide since motives vary with individuals. Loss, especially loss of a relationship, is one of the most common factors preceding the suicide of a young person. Other types of loss and lack of hope for the future, also often underlie thoughts of suicide.

Another myth is that once someone has attempted suicide, the person has put aside the idea and is no longer in danger. **Not true** — as many as 80% of all completed suicides occurred after previous attempts, and this is especially true for young people. Also, if someone who has been depressed suddenly seems happier, do not assume that the danger has passed. A person, having decided to end his or her life, may "feel better", may feel a sense of relief having made this decision.

As mentioned earlier, very few suicides occur without some form of warning. Sometimes this warning may be presented verbally and directly. The following statements are typical:

"What's the use of going on."
"You won't have to worry about me much longer."
"Sometimes I think my parents would be happier if I'd never been born."
"I just can't take it any more."
"Sometimes I just feel like killing myself."
"If I killed myself, then people would be sorry."
"One of these days I'll do it; I'll take the pills and end it all!"

Such statements cannot be taken lightly, and should be seen as possible signs of depression or thoughts of suicide.

Yes, You Can Help: General Guidelines

If a friend or another student wants to talk to you about his or her feelings of depression or about suicide, or if you think that someone may be acting suicidal or depressed, it may be difficult to know exactly what to do. These general guidelines will help. (Where possible, it is **strongly recommended** that you have the underlying concepts and procedures described in these guidelines explained by a professionally trained counsellor.)

1. Always treat such talk or behavior seriously; don't believe that "it's just attention-seeking."

2. Do not promise to keep such talk or behavior a secret; it is one secret you should not keep. It's too risky.

3. Do not give quick advice or say that "everything will be alright."

4. Be an active listener. Do a lot of listening; little talking. Let the person know you are hearing what they are saying. Try paraphrasing to check whether you are accurately hearing what is being said.

5. Remember that it is okay to ask the person if they have been thinking about suicide. It won't "put the ideas in their head."

6. Help the person explore his or her own feelings. Do not add to possible guilt by saying things such as "think how your friends and family will feel."

7. Don't "discount" the individual's feelings of crisis by saying things like "things aren't that bad," or "that's not true, you have lots of friends."

8. Show and describe your concern and caring to the person.

9. Don't be afraid to talk openly about the suicidal thoughts. Try to determine whether or not the person has a plan or has attempted suicide earlier.

10. Do not debate whether or not suicide is right or wrong. To do so may add to guilt or feelings of worthlessness.

11. Discussions of this nature do not always progress in a straight forward manner. It may be necessary to check on some point or other. If you miss something or it becomes obvious that you "should" have said something else, don't worry. Apologize and return to what was missed or say what you think needs saying.

12. Remember: You can often be a help just by being there to talk to. Many suicidal crises are immediate and short term. By talking and listening you may swing the person from feelings of "self death" to "self life."

13. Encourage the person to go to a counsellor, minister or parent for additional help. If they won't and the risk remains, contact someone for them. You might consider:

    - contacting the person's parents
    - bringing in the counsellor
    - contacting the school psychologist
    - accompanying the person to a walk-in clinic
    - phoning the family doctor
    - staying with him or her until help arrives
    - taking him or her to a mental health centre

    Be aware of what community support systems or resources are available.

14. If the risk seems high or immediate, do not leave the person alone or send them on their own to an agency or other resource person. If possible, remove the means (pills, car keys).

15. Continue to be involved. Let the person know you care beyond the immediate crisis. (Remember: even though the risk of suicide may be past for the individual, the person may continue to need assistance — yours as well as that of a professional.)

Note: In any case, this is a difficult situation. You don't have to cope with it by yourself and it's probably wise not to do so. If you have any doubts, get assistance.

Suicide Intervention: Who Can Help?

As mentioned earlier, it is important to know what resources are available. You are not alone; there are individuals and agencies willing and able to assist you, or someone else, in dealing with depression or thoughts of suicide. These same individuals and agencies can provide information and support to assist you in working with others.

Each person's support network is unique; each community provides some kind of service. Generally, the following might provide initial and/or long-term support:

YOURSELF
Parents and other family members
School counsellor
School administrator
Teachers
Neighbors
Friends
Peer support groups
Family and community support services counsellors
Local health units
Employers
Coaches
Social workers
Police
Ministers, priests, rabbis and other religious leaders
Medical personnel
Psychologists
Emergency response personnel
Suicide hot lines
Salvation Army crisis lines

In addition to this general list, there is a network of agencies and individuals specially trained in suicide intervention in the province. Further information can be obtained by contacting the following centre:

SUICIDE INFORMATION AND EDUCATION CENTRE
201, 1615 - 10 Avenue, S.W.
Calgary, Alberta T3C 0J7
Phone: 245-3900

Suicide Information/Prevention Agencies

Canadian Mental Health Association
#201, 723 - 14 Street, N.W.
Calgary, Alberta
T2N 2A4
283-7591

Canadian Mental Health Association
#200, 12120 - 106 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5N 0Z2
482-6091

Alberta Mental Health Services
9942 - 108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 2J5
427-4444

AID Service of Edmonton
#203, 10711 - 107 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5H 0W6
426-3242

Provincial Suicidologist
4th Floor, Seventh Street Plaza
10030 - 107 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5J 3E4
427-2816

Red Deer Suicide Prevention Crisis Services
Box 640
Red Deer, Alberta
T4N 5G6
342-4966

Suicide Prevention Program
8530 Franklin Avenue
Fort McMurray, Alberta
T9H 2J3
743-7894

Suicide Prevention Program
#201, 10118 - 101 Avenue
Grande Prairie, Alberta
T8V 0Y2
539-6692

Canadian Mental Health Association
505 - 7 Street South
Lethbridge, Alberta
T1J 2G8
329-4775

Lethbridge Family Services
3rd Floor, 515 - 7 Street South
Lethbridge, Alberta
T1J 2G8
327-5724

Canadian Mental Health Association
398 Aberdeen Street S.E.
Medicine Hat, Alberta
T1A 0R2
529-6011

Canadian Mental Health Association
#1, 5015 - 48 Street
Red Deer, Alberta
T4N 1S9
342-2266

Check local listings for agencies in your community and enter them below.

Medical Doctor: _____

Family and Community Support Services: _____

Social Services: _____